

## Passage Across the Atlantic (*Overseas Passage*)

By the 1890s steam-powered ships had modernized the business of ocean-travel, replacing sailing vessels and cutting the time to make the Atlantic crossing from three months to two weeks. Large shipping lines such as Cunard and White Star competed fiercely for the immigrants, who were seen as profitable, self-loading cargo. Huge floating villages, the steamships could accommodate as many as two thousand passengers in steerage, so called because it was located on the lower decks where the steering mechanism of the sailing ships had once been housed. These long narrow compartments were divided into separate dormitories for single men, single women, and families. Jammed with metal-framed berths three bunks high, the air in steerage became rank with the heavy odor of spoiled food, sea-sickness, and unwashed bodies. There was little privacy, and the lack of adequate toilet facilities made it difficult to keep clean. Sophia Kreitzberg, a Russian Jew who emigrated in 1908, recalled that "the atmosphere was so thick and dense with smoke and bodily odors that your head itched, and when you went to scratch your head . . . you got lice in your hands." Gradually conditions improved for immigrant passengers. By 1910 many ships had replaced steerage with four and six-berth Third Class cabins. These vessels served meals in dining rooms with long tables set with dishes and utensils. On many of the older ships, however, passengers still ate meals from a tin mess kit while sitting on deck or in the hot, cramped steerage dormitories. "We had a bucket with four or five compartments in it," remembers F. G. Gregot, who immigrated from Lithuania in 1914. "They'd put their food in them compartments. You put a lid on it. And put another compartment on top of that . . . until we finally got all that we was supposed to get." The Italian lines served pasta and wine, and many shipping lines provided kosher food for Jewish passengers, but not all ships catered to ethnic or religious tastes. Cases of malnutrition were not uncommon. Standard fare consisted of potatoes, soup, eggs, fish, stringy meat, prunes and whatever foods the immigrants carried from home." It was a noisy, picturesque, garlicky crowd on the steerage deck," recalled Louis Adamic, a Slovenian immigrant in 1913. "[There were] people of perhaps a dozen nationalities." By the time the steamships sailed into the Upper Bay, First and Second Class passengers had

already been inspected and cleared to land by immigration officials who had come on board from the Quarantine Station at the Hudson River's mouth. Steerage passengers, however, were afforded no such privileges and their first steps on the mainland were brief. Disembarking on the Hudson River piers, they were summarily directed helter-skelter onto ferries which shuttled them to Ellis Island. Chartered by the steamship companies, these vessels were little better than open air barges, freezing in the winter, sweltering hot in the summer, and lacking toilet facilities and lifesaving equipment. Deaths caused by exposure to cold were not uncommon and one Public Health Service official estimated that of the children suffering from measles when they arrived, thirty percent subsequently died because of their trip across the harbor. Although the ferries were thought adequate for the short ride, busy days saw immigrants imprisoned on these vessels for hours while they waited their turn to land at Ellis Island. The harbor was often choked with steamships crammed with as many as twenty thousand passengers waiting to disembark and be ferried to Ellis Island. Sometimes new arrivals had to wait in steerage for days, prolonging the miserable journey, and making America's promise that much more elusive.